



Reforming American Society

MAIN IDEA

Throughout the mid-19th century, men and women embarked on a widespread effort to solve problems in American society.

WHY IT MATTERS NOW

A number of achievements from this period, including laws enacted and institutions established, still exist today.

Terms & Names

- abolition
- Unitarians
- Ralph Waldo Emerson
- transcendentalism
- William Lloyd Garrison
- Frederick Douglass
- Nat Turner
- Elizabeth Cady Stanton
- Seneca Falls convention
- Sojourner Truth

One American's Story

James Forten's great-grandfather had been brought from Africa to the American colonies in chains, but James was born free. By the 1830s Forten had become a wealthy sailmaker. A leader of Philadelphia's free black community, Forten took an active role in a variety of political causes. When some people argued that free blacks should return to Africa, Forten disagreed and responded with sarcasm.

A PERSONAL VOICE JAMES FORTEN

"Here I have dwelt until I am nearly sixty years of age, and have brought up and educated a family. . . . Yet some ingenious gentlemen have recently discovered that I am still an African; that a continent three thousand miles, and more, from the place where I was born, is my native country. And I am advised to go home. . . . Perhaps if I should only be set on the shore of that distant land, I should recognize all I might see there, and run at once to the old hut where my forefathers lived a hundred years ago."

—quoted in *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community 1720–1840*



James Forten

Forten's unwavering belief that he was an American not only led him to oppose colonization—the effort to resettle free blacks in Africa—but also pushed him fervently to oppose slavery. Forten was joined in his opposition to slavery by a growing number of Americans in the 19th century. **Abolition**, the movement to abolish slavery, became the most important of a series of reform movements in America.

A Spiritual Awakening Inspires Reform

Many of these movements had their roots in a spiritual awakening that swept the nation after 1790. People involved in these movements began to emphasize individual responsibility for seeking salvation and insisted that people could improve themselves and society. These religious attitudes were closely linked to



the ideas of Jacksonian democracy that stressed the importance and power of the common person.

THE SECOND GREAT AWAKENING The Second Great Awakening was a widespread Christian movement to awaken religious sentiments that lasted from the 1790s to the 1840s. The primary forum for the movement was the revival meeting, where participants attempted to revive religious faith through impassioned preaching. Revival meetings might last for days as participants studied the Bible, reflected on their lives, and heard emotional sermons. Revivalism had a strong impact on the American public. According to one estimate, in 1800 just 1 in 15 Americans belonged to a church, but by 1850 1 in 6 was a member.

UNITARIANS AND TRANSCENDENTALISTS Another growing religious group was the **Unitarians**, who shared with revivalism a faith in the individual. But instead of appealing to emotions, Unitarians emphasized reason as the path to perfection.

As the Second Great Awakening reached its maturity in the 1830s, another kind of awakening led by a writer, philosopher, and former Unitarian minister named **Ralph Waldo Emerson** began in New England. In 1831, Emerson traveled to England, where he discovered romanticism, an artistic and intellectual movement that emphasized nature, human emotions, and the imagination. From these romantic ideals, Emerson, along with other thinkers, developed a philosophy called **transcendentalism**, which emphasized that truth could be discovered intuitively by observing nature and relating it to one's own emotional and spiritual experience.

MAIN IDEA

Evaluating

A How did the existence of separate black churches benefit the African-American community?

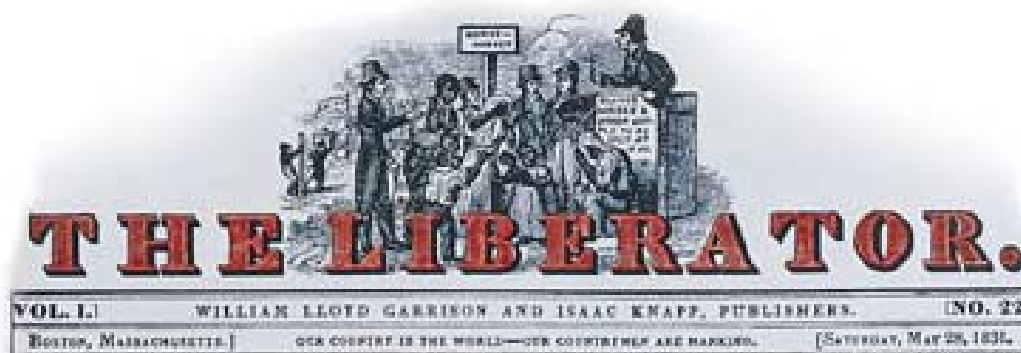
THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN CHURCH The urge to reform was growing among African Americans, too. Slaves in the rural South heard the same sermons and sang the same hymns as did their owners, but they often interpreted the stories they heard, especially those describing the Exodus from Egypt, as a promise of freedom.

In the North, however, free African Americans were able to form their own churches. These churches often became political, cultural, and social centers for African Americans by providing schools and other services that whites denied free blacks. **A**

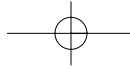
Slavery and Abolition

By the 1820s, abolition—the movement to free African Americans from slavery—had taken hold. More than 100 antislavery societies were advocating that African Americans be resettled in Africa. In 1817, the American Colonization Society had been founded to encourage black emigration. Other abolitionists, however, demanded that African Americans remain in the United States as free citizens.

WILLIAM LLOYD GARRISON The most radical white abolitionist was a young editor named **William Lloyd Garrison**. Active in religious reform movements in Massachusetts, Garrison became the editor of an antislavery paper in 1828. Three years later he established his own paper, *The Liberator*, to deliver an uncompromising demand: immediate emancipation.



◀ William Lloyd Garrison's *The Liberator* was published from 1831 to 1865. Its circulation never grew beyond 3,000.



Before Garrison's call for the immediate emancipation of slaves, support for that position had been limited. In the 1830s, however, that position gained support. Whites who opposed abolition hated Garrison. In 1835 a Boston mob paraded him through town at the end of a rope. Nevertheless, Garrison enjoyed widespread black support; three out of four early subscribers to *The Liberator* were African Americans.



"I consider it settled that the black and white people of America ought to share common destiny."

FREDERICK DOUGLASS, 1851

FREDERICK DOUGLASS One of those eager readers was **Frederick Douglass**, who escaped from bondage to become an eloquent and outspoken critic of slavery. Garrison heard him speak and was so impressed that he sponsored Douglass to speak for various anti-slavery organizations. Hoping that abolition could be achieved without violence, Douglass broke with Garrison, who believed that abolition justified whatever means were necessary to achieve it. In 1847, Douglass began his own antislavery newspaper. He named it *The North Star*, after the star that guided runaway slaves to freedom.

LIFE UNDER SLAVERY In the 18th century, most slaves were male, had recently arrived from the Caribbean or Africa, and spoke one of several languages other than English. By 1830, however, the numbers of male and female slaves had become more equal. The majority had been born in America and spoke English. However, two things remained constant in the lives of slaves—hard work and oppression.

The number of slaves owned by individual masters varied widely across the South. Most slaves worked as house servants, farm hands, or in the fields. Some states allowed masters to free their slaves and even allowed slaves to purchase their freedom over time. But these "manumitted" or freed slaves were very few. The vast majority of African Americans in the South were enslaved and endured lives of suffering and constant degradation. (See "Southern Plantations" on page 147.) **B**

TURNER'S REBELLION Some slaves rebelled against their condition of bondage. One of the most prominent rebellions was led by Virginia slave **Nat Turner**. In August 1831, Turner and more than 50 followers attacked four plantations and killed about 60 whites. Whites eventually captured and executed many members of the group, including Turner.

SLAVE OWNERS OPPOSE ABOLITION The Turner rebellion frightened and outraged slaveholders. In some states, people argued that the only way to prevent slave revolts was through emancipation. Others, however, chose to tighten restrictions on all African Americans to prevent them from plotting insurrections. Some proslavery advocates began to argue that slavery was a benevolent institution. They used the Bible to defend slavery and cited passages that counseled servants to obey their masters.

MAIN IDEA

Making Inferences

B How would you describe the lives of enslaved African Americans in the 1830s?



Southern Plantations

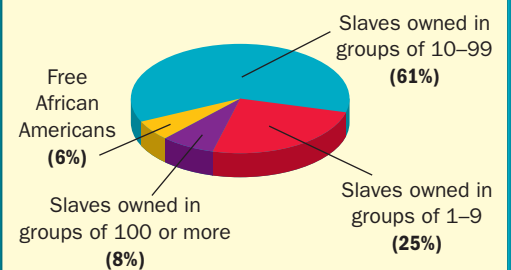
Plantations were virtually self-contained, self-sufficient worlds over which owners ruled with absolute authority. Owners established the boundaries that a slave could not cross without punishment or death. But no boundary protected a slave from the owner's demands or cruel treatment.



Slave quarters, from photograph taken around 1865

Nevertheless, opposition to slavery refused to disappear. Much of the strength of the abolition movement came from the efforts of women—many of whom contributed to other reform movements, including a women's rights movement.

African Americans in the South, 1860



Sources: 1860 figures from *Eighth Census of the United States*; Lewis C. Gray, *History of Agriculture in the Southern United States*.

SKILLBUILDER Interpreting Graphs

According to the pie graph, what was the smallest group of African Americans living in the American South in 1860?

Women and Reform

In the early 19th century, women faced limited options. Prevailing customs encouraged women to restrict their activities after marriage to the home and family. As a result, they were denied full participation in the larger community.

WOMEN MOBILIZE FOR REFORM Despite such pressures, women actively participated in all the important reform movements of the 19th century. For many, their efforts to improve society had been inspired by the optimistic message of the Second Great Awakening. From abolition to education, women worked for reform despite the cold reception they got from many men.

Perhaps the most important reform effort that women participated in was abolition. Women abolitionists raised money, distributed literature, and collected signatures for antislavery petitions to Congress.

Women also played key roles in the temperance movement, the effort to prohibit the drinking of alcohol. Some women, most notably Dorothea Dix, fought to improve treatment for the mentally disabled. Dix also joined others in the effort to reform the nation's harsh and often inhumane prison system.

MAIN IDEA

Analyzing Issues

C What were some of the areas of society that women worked to reform?



EDUCATION FOR WOMEN Work for abolition and temperance accompanied gains in education for women. Until the 1820s, American girls had few educational opportunities beyond elementary school. As Sarah Grimké complained in *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Woman* (1838), a woman who knew “chemistry enough to keep the pot boiling, and geography enough to know the location of the different rooms in her house” was considered learned enough. Grimké believed that increased education for women was a better alternative.

Still, throughout the 1800s, more and more educational institutions for women began to appear. In 1821 Emma Willard opened one of the nation’s first academically-oriented schools for girls in Troy, New York. In addition to classes in domestic sciences, the Troy Female Seminary offered classes in math, history, geography, languages, art, music, writing, and literature. The Troy Female Seminary became the model for a new type of women’s school. Despite tremendous ridicule—people mocked that “they will be educating cows next”—Willard’s school prospered.

In 1833, the first class of Ohio’s Oberlin College included four women, thus becoming the nation’s first fully coeducational college. In 1837, Mary Lyon surmounted heated resistance to found another important institution of higher learning for women, Mount Holyoke Female Seminary (later Mount Holyoke College) in South Hadley, Massachusetts. **D**

EDUCATION AND WOMEN’S HEALTH Improvement in women’s education began to improve women’s lives, most notably in health reform. Elizabeth Blackwell, who in 1849 became the first woman to graduate from medical college, later opened the New York Infirmary for Women and Children. In the 1850s, Catharine Beecher, sister of novelist Harriet Beecher Stowe, and a respected educator in her own right, undertook a national survey of women’s health. To her dismay, Beecher found three sick women for every healthy one. It was no wonder: women rarely bathed or exercised, and the fashionable women’s clothing of the day included corsets so restrictive that breathing sometimes was difficult.

Unfortunately, black women enjoyed even fewer educational opportunities than their white counterparts. In 1831 Prudence Crandall, a white Quaker, opened a school for girls in Canterbury, Connecticut. Two years later she admitted an African-American girl named Sarah Harris. The townspeople protested so vigorously that Crandall decided to enroll only African Americans. This aroused even more opposition, and in 1834 Crandall was forced to close the school and leave town. Only after the Civil War would the severely limited educational opportunities for black women slowly begin to expand.

WOMEN’S RIGHTS MOVEMENT EMERGES The reform movements of the mid-19th century fed the growth of the women’s movement by providing women with increased opportunities to act outside the home. **Elizabeth Cady Stanton** and Lucretia Mott had been ardent abolitionists. Male abolitionists discriminated against them at the World’s Anti-Slavery Convention in 1840, so the pair resolved to hold a women’s rights convention. In 1848, more than 300 women convened in Seneca Falls, New York. Before the convention started, Stanton and Mott composed an agenda and a detailed statement of grievances.

Background

Sarah Grimké and her sister Angelina were leading voices in the abolition and women’s rights movements.

MAIN IDEA

Summarizing

D What improvements in women’s education occurred in the 1820s and ’30s?

KEY PLAYER



ELIZABETH CADY STANTON 1815–1902

Stanton was an ardent abolitionist, and she timed her marriage in 1840 so that she and her new husband could travel together to London for the World’s Anti-Slavery Convention.

She also believed that women deserved the same rights as men and even persuaded the minister to omit the word “obey” from her vow in the marriage ceremony because she felt no need to “obey one with whom I supposed I was entering into an equal relation.”

At the antislavery convention, Stanton and the other women delegates were barred from participation in the convention and were forced to sit and listen from a curtained gallery. There she met Lucretia Mott. Stanton and Mott vowed “to hold a convention as soon as we returned home, and form a society to advocate the rights of women.” Eight years later, the Seneca Falls convention fulfilled that vow.



The participants at the **Seneca Falls convention** approved all parts of the declaration, including a resolution calling for women to have the right to vote. In spite of all the political activity among middle-class white women, African-American women found it difficult to gain recognition of their problems. A former slave named **Sojourner Truth** did not let that stop her, however. At a women's rights convention in 1851, Truth, an outspoken abolitionist, refuted the arguments that because she was a woman she was weak, and because she was black, she was not feminine.

A PERSONAL VOICE SOJOURNER TRUTH

“Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?”

—quoted in *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*



With her dignified bearing and powerful voice, Sojourner Truth made audiences snap to attention. Truth fought for women's rights, abolition, prison reform, and temperance.

MAIN IDEA

Analyzing Issues

E How did Sojourner Truth describe her life as an African-American woman?

As Truth showed, hard work was a fact of life for most women. But she also pointed to the problem of slavery that continued to vex the nation. As abolitionists intensified their attacks, proslavery advocates strengthened their defenses. Before long the issue of slavery threatened to destroy the Union. **E**



ASSESSMENT

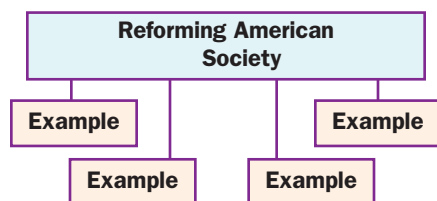
1. TERMS & NAMES For each term or name, write a sentence explaining its significance.

- abolition
- Unitarians
- Ralph Waldo Emerson
- transcendentalism
- William Lloyd Garrison
- Frederick Douglass
- Nat Turner
- Elizabeth Cady Stanton
- Seneca Falls convention
- Sojourner Truth

MAIN IDEA

2. TAKING NOTES

In a diagram similar to the one shown, fill in historical events or key figures related to reforming American society in the 19th century.



Write a paragraph about one of the examples you chose, explaining its significance.

CRITICAL THINKING

3. EVALUATING

Which do you think was a more effective strategy—violence or nonviolence—for eliminating slavery? Why? **Think About:**

- Frederick Douglas
- Nat Turner
- William Lloyd Garrison
- Sojourner Truth

4. MAKING INFERENCES

Consider the philosophical and religious ideas expressed during the Second Great Awakening. How did they influence the activities of 19th-century reformers? **Think About:**

- concepts of individualism and Jacksonian democracy
- the views of Emerson
- the activities of Garrison, Douglass, Stanton, and Truth